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TAGS: [SENV](#) [KGHG](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [MG](#)
SUBJECT: MONGOLIA'S MEGA-FISH IN FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In Mongolia the taimen, a giant member of the salmon family and a prized catch for sport fishermen, is becoming increasingly rare and facing a number of threats. This was underlined October 17 at a taimen conservation conference in Ulaanbaatar. Hucho Taimen (aka Siberian taimen) are said to pull like a pit bull, live for decades and measure upwards of six feet long. Researchers say they are imperiled by overfishing, a lack of governmental protections, and global warming. Other threats loom on the horizon, including the construction of a hydroelectric plant on the Eg River and the prospect of expanded mining operations. Conservationists are encouraging residents of the Eg-Uur watershed area, in remote northern Mongolia, to embrace high-end fly-fishing and ecotourism. Some such tourism is occurring, but taimen survival is undermined by the lack of a concession system, a paucity of rangers and a surfeit of irresponsible tour operators, researchers say. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) The Mongolian taimen, a giant member of the salmon family and a prized catch for sport fishermen, is growing increasingly rare and faces a number of threats. This was underlined October 17 at a taimen conservation conference in Ulaanbaatar, where 60 academics, environmentalists and Mongolian Government officials heard researchers provide an update on the fourth year of a five-year study on taimen populations, migration and spawning. Researchers from the University of Wisconsin (Madison), University of California (Davis), University of Nevada (Reno) and the National University of Mongolia are conducting the most extensive study ever undertaken on hucho taimen (aka Siberian taimen), which are found only in Mongolia and Russia, often live three decades or more, can exceed six feet and according to sportsmen, pull like a pit bull.

REMOTE STRETCH OF NORTHERN MONGOLIA

13. (SBU) The study is centered on the remote Eg-Uur watershed area, a triangular wedge in the northern provinces of Hovsgol and Bulgan. Bordered by the Eg and Uur rivers, the area has come under increasing strain from overfishing, poaching and a lack of governmental protections. According to the latest data, the area is now home to only 2,000 taimen. Experts said the fish is imperiled, in part, by the lack of a consistent catch and release system. The fish is also threatened by global warming, which reduces water levels and raises water temperatures; taimen require cold water. The future will bring graver threats, including a Mongolian Government hydroelectric power plant on the Eg River and the possibility of expanded mining operations. (Note: There is currently only one major mining operation in the Eg-Uur watershed area. Researchers tested water samples but did not detect any mining-related chemicals. However, artisanal mining is believed to occur in the area, and thorough research on possible water contamination has yet to be carried out. End Note.)

SPECIES AT RISK, BUT NOT LEGALLY PROTECTED

14. (SBU) Although the slow-growing taimen are listed on the Government's "red list" of at-risk species, no law specifically outlaws their removal from a river. Catch-and-release is encouraged, but this practice is not widely known or practiced by most local residents -- nor the many wealthy and influential Mongolians who visit the area to do battle with the giant fish. The Taimen Conservation Fund (TCF), an NGO that organized the study and conference, encourages residents of the watershed area to embrace high-value, low-impact fly-fishing and ecotourism. While this has resulted in some well-heeled foreign tourists visiting and engaging in catch-and-release sportfishing, some Mongolians continue to hunt

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taimen illegally with nets or spears, sometimes during the spawning season. Not all of the poachers are locals; some are high-rollers from Russia, drawn by the area's stellar fly-fishing opportunities and by the opportunity to hunt wild boar and two types of deer.

NO CONCESSION SYSTEM YET IN PLACE

15. (SBU) The ongoing study is aimed, in part, at prodding the GOM into establishing a clear concession system whereby stretches of the Eg-Uur watershed area are rented out to tour operators, which could be held accountable. However, no concession system has yet been put in place. At present, a tour operator (in many cases, a fly-fishing operator) has to enter into a contract with the local government of one of the nine counties that make up the watershed area. The contract must then be approved by the provincial government, and the operator then has to obtain from the Ministry of Nature and Environment (MNE) a US\$48 catch-and-release license for each angler.

This may seem a relatively straightforward process, but many operators say it is time-consuming, costly and overly bureaucratic. Many tour operators find ways around these three steps, allegedly greasing palms along the way. The conference heard that even when US\$48 is collected for a caught taimen, the money reaches the MNE and "disappears," with no investment made in protecting taimen stocks.

EARLY MISSTEPS

16. (SBU) Between 2003 and 2006, efforts to set up a concession system were complicated by missteps of the Global Environmental Fund (GEF), which funds the TCF. The GEF had vested much of the operational authority for the concession system with the central government. The GOM was to tender fishing rights to a consortium made up largely of sport-fishing companies that meet technical-capacity requirements. Few firms could meet these requirements; in fact, only one American firm active in the Eg-Uur Watershed could meet these specifications. (That firm was also involved in the formation of the TCF and in obtaining the grant from GEF.) In the system envisioned by the GEF, no one would be allowed to fish in the concession unless permitted by the concessionaire, and the concessionaire would have unspecified enforcement powers.

In effect, Mongolians would not be allowed to fish in their own country, while relatively wealthy foreigners could cast and catch with abandon. Understandably, this did not go down well with locals and generated tremendous ill will toward the TCF project, which in turn slowed progress on protecting taimen. Nowadays, the TCF is pushing a more inclusive, community-based approach, to obtain buy-in from local residents. Local residents acknowledge the change in approach, but past mistakes have made them skeptical.

IRRESPONSIBLE TOUR OPERATORS THRIVING...

17. (SBU) Tour operators who are willing to skirt the rules and to pocket imaginary GOM fees can generate handsome profits. One tour company we contacted without identifying ourselves told us that a foreign angler can obtain GOM permission to catch and release a taimen for \$120. For an additional \$150, the company explained, the angler could take his taimen home. Although there is, in fact, a fee for sportfishing, there is no official fee that one can pay to take a taimen trophy home. (Note: There is a brisk and illegal sale in preserved, mounted taimen in Ulaanbaatar; some are offered at local markets market for around \$50. End Note.)

... AMID CHRONIC LACK OF RANGERS

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18. (SBU) The GOM's primary line of defense against poachers - rangers - are too few to cover the necessary terrain, a point driven home at the conference. Moreover, rangers are poorly paid and subject to bribes from tour operators and well-heeled Mongolians. A total of 772 ranger positions are supposed to be filled nationwide, but only 444 rangers are currently employed (382 by the central government and 62 by provincial governments). Mongolian authorities blame the shortfall on budgetary limitations. In the Eg-Uur watershed area, home to 50,000 residents, at least 30 rangers are active.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

19. (SBU) The TCF claims that mining is wreaking environmental and social damage in many Mongolian watersheds. It cites such negative impacts as sedimentation, nutrient loading and the alteration of river hydrology, all of which can interrupt or block the spawning or migration of taimen. The Eg-Uur watershed area has thus far escaped the worst mining-related damage. Whether it will remain a pristine idyll for sport fishermen, and their prized taimen, will depend largely on the whether the GOM can regulate mining in the area, halt overfishing and ensure that the hydroelectric plant doesn't harm the ecology of the Eg River. Post will continue to monitor the situation and explore what the USG can do to promote the taimen's survival.

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